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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001244

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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY, NICOLAIDES)
E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: DISTRICT ELECTIONS IN TURKMENISTAN -- GOVERNMENT CLAIMS
96.95% TURNOUT, EMBASSY ESTIMATES MAYBE 20%

REFS: A. ASHGABAT 1183
[B](#). ASHGABAT 1210
[C](#). ASHGABAT 1215
[D](#). ASHGABAT 1222

Summary

[1](#). (SBU) District-level elections for members of local people's councils proceeded with much fanfare but low voter turnout on December 3. Official reports claimed turnout reached 96.95%, embassy officers found voter turnout, at least in Ahal Province and in the Magtymguly District of Balkan Province, to be low and centered primarily among those whose livelihoods depended on the government -- i.e., government employees, pensioners and students. Complete results have not been published, but it is safe to declare that absent broad-based public participation, Turkmenistan is a long way from claiming credible elections. End Summary.

A Big Pre-election Build-up by the Government

[2](#). (U) As noted ref a, on December 3 elections were held for members of etrap (district) people's councils from slates of candidates that were - at least theoretically - selected for the first time through an open nomination system. The Government of Turkmenistan for weeks has been gearing up for this election (refs b and c), with almost daily announcements in newspapers and news shows that this event was coming and that all citizens had the responsibility to participate. And yet, when December 3 rolled around, life was mostly Sunday as usual in Turkmenistan.

Voters Scarce

[3](#). (U) On December 3, emboffs visited many of the polling sites and markets in Ahal Province (Charge visited voting stations in historic eponymous Magtymguly -- formerly Garagala -- District in Balkan Province, home of Turkmenistan's most famous poet) in order to get a sense of voter turnout and attitudes. Although official reports

claimed 96.95% turnout, emboffs uniformly reported low voter participation; no officer reported seeing any more than 10 voters entering the polling places in a 30-minute period. In most cases, the flow of voters was substantially lower (several emboffs reported seeing voting places that were so deserted that it was only by seeing the refreshments table in the courtyards and signs over the doors that these were identifiable as voting stations). Those who voted in person overwhelmingly appeared to be those whose livelihoods depended on the government largesse: government employees (including teachers), pensioners and students. (Comment: Based on emboffs' observations, actual turnout was no more than 20%; the rates were likely bolstered by allowing one family member to cast ballots for all adults in the household, and by taking traveling ballot boxes house-to-house, a common practice on December 3 and in earlier elections. End Comment.)

Non-Voters Uninformed and Uninterested

¶4. (SBU) By contrast, most markets were bustling with the usual Sunday-morning activity. Most of the individuals whom emboffs randomly surveyed reported that, although they were aware of the elections, they did not plan to participate because "I have my own things to take care of" and "nobody told me how to vote." When asked, a number believed that the elections were important because "they determine the future of the country," but almost nobody claimed to know who was running in their districts. Neither could anyone respond to questions regarding individual candidates' campaign platforms. Although at least Ashgabat residents received invitations to vote from one or more candidates, little other campaigning occurred. A normally well-informed embassy employee, agreeing that the government had done a poor job in introducing candidates, said that he and his family members had not known who

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their candidates were until an election committee worker visited them at their apartment during the afternoon of December 3 to get the adults' ballots. Given a slate including a police chief, a human resources official in a state-run textile dying plant and a geophysicist, this employee's family had supported the individual that seemed to be least tied to the government: the scientist. On the other hand, a local source excitedly told Charge he and his neighbors had voted for a neighbor, but only after the candidate had promised them a new bus stop, a welcome indication of nascent demand for accountability.

Same Story in Magtymguly

¶5. (SBU) On election eve and election day, Charge visited Magtymguly Etrap, known for its exotic fruit, vegetable and nut cultivation, and home to Turkmenistan's national poet, his father and the Goklen and Nohur tribes. Current etrap governor Alaberdy Ovezov, displaying a native-son knowledge of his district's potential, noted local issues revolved around developing agriculture, transportation and potable water sources. Ovezov seemed to have all the time in the world for Charge, even though he also, theoretically, was running for office and had only held his position for three months.

¶6. (SBU) Charge drove past two deserted polling stations outside of the town of Magtymguly on her way to meet Ovezov to visit two in-town stations at the cultural center and an elementary school. As with the Ahal Province polling stations, Charge saw one voter during her 30 minute stay at the cultural center, and a minivan of retirees -- perhaps five voters -- during her 30 minute stay at the elementary school. Ovezov did not seem perturbed by the low turnout and appeared baffled by the concept of campaigning. He admitted to Charge that his opponent, the local head of education who controlled the district's schools and teachers, was "very powerful." (Comment: It will be interesting to see if Ovezov wins. His nonchalance could be attributed to recognition that he is not the "chosen" candidate. Clearly the transition from life-long bureaucrat to politician has not been natural for Ovezov. End Comment.)

Election Results Not Available Yet

¶7. (U) Election results were announced for Ashgabat on December 5, and all incumbent hakims in the five electoral districts were elected. (Comment: Post expects the formerly-appointed hakims to be elected as hakims from among the 40 newly-elected members of the district people's councils. End Comment.) Embassy does not expect the five welayat election results to be made public for at least several days. Only then will it be possible to see how election commissions and voters responded to President Niyazov's orders November 27 (after the nomination period was over) to ensure selection of four new etrap hakims (district heads), in contradiction to the precepts laid out in Turkmenistan's election regulations (ref d).

Comment

¶8. (SBU) These elections do not begin to approach international standards and President Niyazov further tainted the process one week ago when he directed that the etrap governors he appointed be re-elected. That said, these elections constitute a tentative step in the right direction. The real test of the credibility of the elections process in Turkmenistan will be with the presidential elections in 2009, if Niyazov retires. End Comment.

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